
The Ex Vows
'Tender, emotional and deeply romantic'
B.K. Borison
JESSICA JOYCE

PRAISE FOR

You, with a View

"Jessica Joyce has gifted all of us with an electrifying debut, and the perfect summer read! If you love your flirting paired with a healthy dose of roasting, rivals-turned-lovers, road trips that become journeys of self-discovery, hilarious but sexy banter, and steamy love stories, this is the beach read you want to pick up! A million out of five stars, Jessica Joyce is a new and forever fave!"

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New York Times bestselling author of *Love, Theoretically*

"Sometimes all it takes to get back on track is a road trip with your oldest rival . . . Jessica Joyce's debut, *You, with a View*, stole my heart and had me absolutely sweating at the chemistry between Theo and Noelle. I will never see a vintage red Bronco, a TikTok travel video, or a man's thighs the same way again."

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"Stunningly heartfelt and sexy beyond words. Jessica Joyce writes with a deeply empathetic pen, drawing each character with profound tenderness and crafting the perfect amount of rivals-to-reluctant-road-trip-companions-to-lovers tension—incidentally, my new favorite trope. I want to live inside this book."

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"Jessica Joyce's debut is a treasure! *You, with a View* is a romantic adventure that will make you want to pack your bags and take a chance on love. This heartwarming love story is a gift for romance readers who want to laugh, cry, and swoon."

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"*You, with a View* is a sexy-as-hell romance that I couldn't put down, a heartfelt tribute to the love of grandparents, and an achingly relatable exploration of the search for 'success' in your twenties. Noelle and Theo's road trip is as epic as their emotional journey, leaving my heart a happy, mushy mess by the end. I love this book."

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author of *Love & Other Disasters* and *Something Wild & Wonderful*

"Jessica Joyce wields razor-sharp prose with emotional poignancy and the perfect dose of unbelievable romantic tension with spice to create an instant classic in the romance genre. I'll read anything she writes." —Mazey Eddings, author of *The Plus One*

"*You, with a View* is the total package: swoony, sexy, funny, and profoundly moving. Noelle and Theo's irresistible chemistry had me tearing through the pages, and the depth and beauty of Jessica Joyce's writing lingered with me long after I finished. This is a book that nestles deep into your heart and stays there."

—Ava Wilder, author of *How to Fake It in Hollywood*

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"Simultaneously escapist and deeply intimate, *You, with a View* is a love story about soulmates—both romantic and familial—and the importance of seizing the present while honoring the past. Debut author Jessica Joyce's prose and voice shine on every page, threading her leads' simmering tension and tangible chemistry through a vividly drawn travel adventure. The result is a soul-satisfying romance about the genesis of beautiful things out of grief, and of two people discovering that what they truly seek has been there on the journey with them all along."

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"With crisp prose and twisty plotting, this romp should win Joyce many fans." —*Publishers Weekly*

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For past me,
who didn't give up,
and for future me,
who will look back on all of this and be so proud.

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Prologue

I hate thinking about the way it ended, but sometimes I think about the way it began: with me walking through the door of someone else's house without knocking.

This has always been a typical move of mine, wandering latchkey kid that I was in my early years. But in every other way, the beginning was an atypical day.

When I let myself go there, I watch it in my head like a movie. I let it feel like it's happening now instead of thirteen years ago, where the real moment belongs, where fifteen-year-old me is turning the doorknob on a house I've burst into hundreds of times before. I find no resistance, because by my sophomore year of high school—when this memory takes place—my open invitation into the Cooper-Kims' home is implied.

My best friend, Adam Kim, is somewhere in here, probably still sweaty and gross from cross-country practice. At least I went home and showered.

I greet Adam's three rescue dogs, Gravy, Pop-Tart, and Dave, my ears perking at the dulcet tones of a video game played at full volume, two voices rumbling below it. The dogs trail me as I make my way to the den, the tags on their collars jingling. It's a sound as familiar as my own heartbeat.

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Adam's house is warm and sun-filled, often noisy, with a lingering, faint citrus scent. The first time I walked in, something unraveled in my chest; it felt like *home*, not a place where two people lived with sometimes intertwining lives. My house is quiet and often empty, just as it was all the years between when my mom left when I was three years old and now.

The times my dad and I do sync up are great; he asks tons of questions and tells me what a great kid I am, how easy I've been, how proud he is of my grades and the extracurriculars that keep me busy. He listens to every story I can get out of my mouth, his phone facedown on the dining room table while it buzzes and buzzes and buzzes. Eventually the phone wins, and I'm left craving more time.

It's why I've made a habit of making other people's houses my home, and why I love the Cooper-Kims' house best.

In this memory, I'm nearly to the den, wondering who Adam has over. I sincerely hope it isn't Jared; I keep telling Adam what a dick he is.

With the power of hindsight, I know what's going to happen seconds before it does, so I always hold my breath here—

Right when I turn the corner and run face-first into a broad chest. It has so little padding it makes my teeth rattle.

"Whoa," a voice breathes above me, stirring the hairs at my temple. Warm, strong hands grip my arms to keep me upright.

I look up . . . and up, into a face fifteen-year-old me has never seen before.

Whoever this is, he's beautiful. He's tall (obviously) and broad-shouldered, with limbs he hasn't grown into. In this moment, I don't know that he'll fill out in a painfully attractive way—his chest will broaden to become the perfect pillow for my head. His

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thighs will grow just shy of thick, mouth-wateringly curved with muscle, the perfect perch for me when I sit in his lap.

But the eyes I'm looking into won't change. They'll stay that hypnotic mix of caramel and gold, rimmed in deep coffee brown and framed by sooty lashes and inky eyebrows that match the hair on his head. They'll continue to catch mine the way they are in this movie moment—like a latch hooking me, then locking us into place.

"Oh. Hello," I say brilliantly.

His mouth pulls up, which is wide and meant for the toothy smiles I'll discover he doesn't give away easily. He's prone to quiet ones, or shy, curling ones, like he's giving me now. "Hey."

I step back, my heart flipping from our crash and the warmth his hands have left behind on my skin. "Sorry, I didn't know Adam had someone over."

"Never stopped you before, Woodward," Adam calls distractedly, his eyes glued to the TV screen.

I roll mine, turning back to this stranger. "I'm that doofus's best friend, Georgia."

"Like the peach," he says, his voice lifting at the end. It's not a question, but a tentative tease. In my life, I've heard that joke a million times and hate it, but here, I like the way he says it, as if he knows how ridiculous it is and is in on the joke.

I grin. When I'm watching this, I think about how open my expression is, how hopeful and full of sunshine. "Good one. No one's ever said that to me before."

His eyes narrow, like he's trying to figure me out. I make note of how quickly he does, a tendril of belonging curling around me when he laughs. "You're joking."

"Yes," I laugh back.

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He pretends to look disappointed. "So I'm *not* the first?"

"More like lucky number ninety-nine," I shoot back, and he grins. A toothy one. "Should I call you by the number or do you have a name, too?"

"That's Eli— mother*fucker*," Adam shouts.

My gaze slips from the stranger—Eli Joseph Mora, I'll find out—to Adam, whose tongue is sticking out while he furiously pounds on a game controller. A second one lies next to him, a decimated bag of Doritos next to that.

When I direct my attention back to Eli, our eyes click. I hear it in my head, feel it in my chest, both in the memory and for real. Whenever I let myself think about the beginning, I want to get out of this moment as much as I want to wallow in it.

Fifteen-year-old me smiles up at fifteen-year-old him. "Hey, Eli. I hope *you're* not the motherfucker."

"Not that I'm aware of," he says. His eyes spark with amusement and other things, and the spark transfers to me, burrowing somewhere deep. It'll wait there for years while we go from strangers to friends to best friends. It won't catch fire until our junior year of college, when he joins me at Cal Poly after two years at community college.

"Who are you, then? Other than a stranger until"—I look down at my watch, a Fossil one I bought with the Christmas cash my dad gave me because he didn't want to get the wrong one—"three minutes ago."

"The new guy, I guess?" I notice his nose is sunburned along the bridge when he scrunches it. "I just moved from Denver, started at Glenlake two days ago."

He doesn't tell me now, but later he'll divulge that his parents moved him and his two younger sisters to Glenlake, a city in

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Marin County just north of San Francisco, to live with his aunt. His dad lost his job as a mortgage broker when the economy crashed, starting a relentless financial slide until they lost their house. At fifteen, Eli's sleeping on a pull-out in his aunt's rec room; later, when we buy our first bed together, I talk him into splurging for a king.

I always notice the way his shoulders pull up toward his ears, maybe wondering if I'm going to ask questions. He doesn't trust me with his heavy stuff yet, but eventually he'll trust me with a lot of it, before we both start hiding ourselves away.

"Adam's already got you in his clutches?" I raise my voice. "You work fast, Kim."

Adam grins, but doesn't spare us a glance.

Eli looks over his shoulder at his new friend, then back at me, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah, I think he kind of adopted me."

"He does that," I say, remembering that fateful day in sixth grade when Adam and I met, a month after my best friends of three years, Heather Russo and Mya Brogan, unceremoniously dropped me. Halfway into our inaugural year of middle school, the friends I thought were forever suddenly decided I was too needy, that my desire to hang out at their houses all the time was burdensome, and my occasional emotional moments were supremely irritating.

In the end, Adam saved me from my loneliness. It makes sense that he'd save Eli, too, though I don't know yet that he's also lonely, or that Adam's house will become his home as much as it is mine.

"All right, Eli," I say, looking him up and down. He's wearing scuffed Nikes, gym shorts, and a T-shirt with a tear near the

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neck. I can see a sliver of collarbone pressing sharply against his golden skin, the glint of a fragile gold chain. "I guess I'm kind of adopting you, too."

His eyes move over my face. "Probably a good idea, since I've already got a nickname picked out for you and everything."

"Does Adam have one?"

"Slim Kim," Eli says automatically, and I laugh as Adam scoffs. He's all elbows and knees at fifteen. "Still workshopping it, though."

It'll morph over the years—Slim Kimmy, SK, Kiz, or Kizzy. I'll watch him test versions of nicknames with other friends, but mine will only ever be Peach. When I eventually ask him why, he'll tell me it's because he knew exactly who I was to him from the start.

I glance at Adam. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I think I won the nickname portion of this adoption process."

My chest warms at the way Eli's grin widens. It's an addicting feeling, knowing I'm in the middle of meeting a person I'll get to hang on to.

Adam looks at me over Eli's shoulder, his mouth pulling up, and I know he feels it, too: the three of us are going to be friends. Something special.

Years later Eli will tell me that he fell in love with me right then, and in this movie-like memory I always see it—how we can't quite break eye contact, the flush along the shell of his ear when I sit next to him on the couch minutes later, the way his eyes linger on me when Adam and I bicker over control of the TV, the steady bounce of his knee. The beautiful, shy smile he gives me over the pizza we have for dinner later.

He'll hold on to it for years, but eventually that spark will become a wildfire.

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And then we'll burn it all down.

Chapter One

Thirteen years later

This wedding is cursed

"Not again," I mutter.

To the untrained eye, this text probably looks like a joke, or the beginning of one of those chain emails our elders get duped into forwarding to twenty of their nearest and dearest, lest they inherit multigenerational bad luck.

In actuality, it's been Adam's mantra for the past eight months.

Adam is the brother I never had and I'm truly honored to be along for the ride on his wedding journey. But had sixth-grade Georgia anticipated I'd be fielding forty-seven daily texts from my more-unhinged-by-the-minute best friend, I would've thought twice about complimenting his Hannah Montana shirt the day we met.

My Spidey senses tingle with this text, though. It hasn't been delivered in aggressive caps lock, nor is it accompanied by a chaotic menagerie of GIFs (my kingdom for a Michael Scott alternative). Whatever has happened now might actually be an emergency.

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Then again, the wedding is ten days away. At this point, anything that isn't objectively awesome is a disaster.

I pluck my phone off my desk, typing, What's the damage?

A bubble immediately pops up, disappears, reappears, then stops again.

"*Great* sign."

It's nearly four p.m. on Wednesday, the day before my week-long PTO for the wedding starts, and I still have half a page of unchecked boxes on my to-do list, plus a detailed While I'm Away email to draft for my boss. I can't leave Adam hanging in his moment of need, though. What kind of best woman would I be?

No better than the largely absent best man? comes the uncharitable punchline. I slam the door on that thought. It's not like I've minded executing most of the best-people activities; it's been a godsend for multiple reasons. It's just so typical of him to—

I catch my own eye in the computer's reflection, delivering a silent message with the downward slash of my dark eyebrows: *Shut. Up.* I'd rather think about curses than anything tangentially related to the subject of Eli Mora.

Not that I believe in curses at all.

Except . . . deep down, I do worry that Adam's been hounded by bad vibes since he proposed to his fiancée, Grace Song, on New Year's Eve. Their plans have involved a comedy of errors that have escalated from *bummer* to *oh shit*: the wrong wedding dress ordered by the bridal salon, names misspelled on their printed wedding invitations twice, and—the one that nearly got me to believe—their wedding planner quit three months ago because his Bernedoodle had amassed such a following on social media that he was making triple his salary as her manager.

For Adam, whose natural temperament hovers somewhere near live wire, it's been a constant test of his sanity. Even Grace, who's brutally chill, the perfect emotional foil for Adam, has been fraying.

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But then, she would've been fine eloping. Every new disaster probably only further solidifies the urge to book it to Vegas.

Adam's texts tumble over one another:

Georgia

Our fucking DJ

BROKE THEIR HIP

LINE DANCING AT A BACHELORETTE PARTY

IN NASHVILLE

I need to know what I've done in my 28 years on this dying earth that is causing this to happen

I start to type, but he beats me to it.

That was rhetorical, Woodward, DON'T

Clearly Adam's shifting out of his panic fugue, so I shift into fix-it mode. It's the reason he came to me out of everyone—he knows I'll step up without hesitation.

Deep breath. Nothing's burned to the ground, right? I text back. This is problematic but not fatal. We'll come up with a new list.

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The bubbles of doom pop up again and I wait. Again.

I wish I could say my eagerness to jump into this shitstorm is fully altruistic, but since I got back from a six-month work stint in Seattle three months ago, I can count on one hand the number of times I've seen Adam, all wedding-related. This has been the only way to reliably stay in his orbit.

For now, anyway.

Here's the thing: I'm a list girl. I learned the magic of them long ago—the way they can streamline tasks and expectations. Needs and emotions. How they can take a messy, chaotic thing and make it manageable. They've been my coping strategy since I was a kid. They quiet my mind and untangle my emotions so that I stay cool, calm, and compartmentalized. So *I'm* not a messy, chaotic thing.

Needless to say, it aggrieves me that I can't list my way out of my recent realization: my closest friends have fully shifted into phases I'm not in—falling in love, cohabitating, building social circles with other happy couples that make me the extra wheel, a feeling I avoid as resolutely as Trader Joe's on a Sunday. My time in Seattle only made it more obvious, and I hate that there's no checklist that'll pivot me off this path.

It's not that I expected an epic welcome home party, but I *did* expect to come back to my favorite people still living in the same city as me. Instead, I returned to an entirely different landscape: Adam and Grace moved to Glenlake from their apartment in the Inner Richmond six blocks away. Jamie Rothenberg, my other best friend and roommate for the last five years, went and fell in love while I was gone, too, and moved into her girlfriend's Oakland bungalow right before I got back.

Really, though, it's fine.

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Okay, sure, loneliness is gnawing at me, a feeling that's been

familiar since I was old enough to know what it was (kindergarten, when my dad couldn't make it to my holiday concert and I sang my solo to our neighbor, who showed up in his place). Yes, I can feel it curling up next to me at night in an apartment that used to echo with Jamie's honking laughter instead of the reruns of *New Girl* I put on a timer so I can sleep. Absolutely, watching two of my best friends find the kind of love I once thought I had is fairly soul-destroying. As is being knee-deep in my best friend's wedding festivities, knowing that in ten days I have to stand beside—

My phone buzzes. I jump, shaking off that unwanted, sideswiping thought, and turn my attention to Adam's text: Can you help with a DJ list that isn't shitty?

That deserves a voice message. "Can I help with a list? Seriously?"

Like all the other times Adam's called me in for support, it's a serotonin hit that chases the lonely feeling away.

And once the wedding is over, what happens then? a quiet voice asks. Like all my messiest thoughts, I wrestle it into submission.

Adam's follow-up text comes as a Teams notification dings politely on my computer. My head swivels on instinct, ponytail sweeping across my cheek.

NIA OSMAN: can I borrow you for 5?

Adam and my boss needing me play tug-of-war on my people-pleasing tendencies, but only one of them is paying me.

Nia needs to chat, I text. Take a deep breath, listen to your Calm app. I'll come back to you on the broken DJ ASAP.

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My phone chimes twice, but I ignore it, mentally apologizing to Adam as I start the short trek down the bright white hall to Nia's office.

"Georgia!" a voice calls when I'm nearly at her door.

I turn to see Shay, a recent engineer steal from our biggest rival, walking up.

"Hey!" I say, clocking her wide smile. A gold star materializes on my mental chart; somewhere, an HR angel gets its wings. "How's it going?"

"*Amazing.* I love my team and my boss and—" She laughs self-consciously, tucking a blond curl behind her ear. "Actually, it'd probably be easier if I listed the things I don't like." Her green eyes widen. "Which is nothing!"

I smile, feeling the familiar endorphin rush of a role well filled. I adore my job. I've been here nearly five years and knew as soon as I interviewed with Nia that it was the perfect fit; now I get to do the same for the people I bring in.

"These are the updates I live for." Gesturing to Nia's office, I say, "I have to go, but let's grab lunch when you've settled in, okay?"

"Sounds perfect," Shay calls as she strides away.

Nia is seated at her sleek white desk when I enter, chin propped in her hand. Behind her, the floor-to-ceiling windows frame a view of Chinatown and North Beach, and beyond it, the Golden Gate Bridge stretching across the sun-blanketed bay.

"Another satisfied customer?" she asks as I sink into the acrylic chair facing her, a black eyebrow rising over her thick red frames.

I buff my nails on my shoulder. "The Georgia Woodward streak continues."

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She smiles, but it fades as she removes her glasses. "Listen . . ."

My stomach drops. Am I in trouble? While I can't say the same for my personal life, I've transitioned seamlessly back into my role here. I'm good at my job. I rarely make mistakes, and when I do, I own them. They're never repeated; I make sure of it, because I have a Mistakes Never to Make Again list I reference often.

My mind flashes to the item at the top: those fifteen months I spent in New York right out of college, the apartment lease with two scrawled signatures, shaky from excitement. A pair of warm brown eyes meeting mine, locking into place, full of happiness and love—

Nope. No, no, no.

I focus on Nia, who isn't wearing her mistake face. It's not a good face, but I don't think this is about me.

"Oh god, are you leaving?" I blurt out. She's not only my boss but my mentor, the kind of kickass human resources leader I hope to be someday.

"No, I'm not leaving. And you've done nothing wrong, before you ask. I want you to . . ." Nia pauses, spreading her arms wide. The thick gold bracelets on each of her wrists jingle musically as she continues. "Take in what I'm about to tell you."

I wipe my sweating palms on my pants. "Okay."

"You know that our Seattle office has been massively growing, considering you're responsible for filling at least half those seats."

I nod, anxiety creeping up my throat.

"Arjun"—our CEO—"wants to shift the workforce focus to the Seattle office and eventually make San Francisco a satellite location. There are state-to-state financial implications I won't bore you with, but the company is in the process of making strategic

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role transfers." Nia leans back, her mouth twisting. "You led the build of the Seattle team perfectly, and you were a rockstar while I was out on maternity leave before that."

"Okay," I repeat, drawing out the word.

"The recruiting director in the Seattle office quit a couple weeks ago," she says, looking straight at me, her dark eyes penetrating. "They want to fill the role internally and dissolve the senior manager position here."

It's as if she's dropped one thousand puzzle pieces into my hands with five seconds to solve it. "Senior mana— that's my position."

"Turns out you're so good at your job they're taking you away from me, Georgia. You're getting a promotion, your own team to lead." Nia pauses. "But that promotion is in Seattle."

All the blood drains from my body.

Seattle is not San Francisco. Seattle is in *Washington*, eight hundred miles away. I'm fated mates with the Bay Area—I was born here, grew up here. My apartment is here, my friends and my dad, too, though I rarely see him thanks to his thirty-years-and-running devotion to his job as a public defender. I like being here when he needs me, though; it's been just the two of us since the day my mom decided parenting was too much for her. He relies on me in his way.

The point is, all my connection points are here. My *life* is here, one that took a significant hit during my six months in Seattle. What if I made the move permanently? Would I ever see Adam and Jamie, or would I lose them to time and distance and domestic bliss, the way so many adult friendships fade away?

"What if I don't take it?"

Nia's eyes soften with apology. "There won't be a position here. I wouldn't be able to keep you."

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I'm close enough to Nia that I can be real, at least with my

swirling work-related worries. "You seriously think I can lead a team on my own?"

She gives me a look. "Georgia, you already have."

She knows I mean forever, not temporarily, but I let that sink in anyway, remembering the anxiety I felt when I took over while Nia was on maternity leave, the way it melted when Arjun said he'd heard I was doing a great job a few weeks later. Being handed the opportunity to lead recruitment in Seattle and the sense of accomplishment I felt when I left a thriving team there. The restlessness I've felt since I came back. I spent the majority of the last eighteen months stretching myself to the limit and loving it. These past few months have been like hitting cruise control at fifty-five after an extended jag at one hundred.

Nia must see it on my face. She leans forward for the hard sell, elbows resting on her desk. "I've worked with you for almost five years. You're the best employee I've ever had, and that's not an exaggeration."

"You're allergic to exaggeration."

"Exactly," she says, her burgundy-painted mouth pulling up. "This move is the culmination of your hard work. You deserve this, Georgia. It's just a matter of whether you want it."

The panic and misery ebb, replaced by an addicting feeling: pleasure. My response to praise is Pavlovian; when I get it, I want more. Nia is feeding it to me on a silver platter.

They want me to move back for good. But they're doing it because I'm fucking awesome at my job. Because I *killed* it. Because they need me.

I swallow against the anxiety and pride knotted in my throat. "That means a lot coming from you."

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Her smile is warm, but then she straightens, turning no-nonsense. "I know you're going out for your best friend's wedding

and I'm sorry for dropping this on you the day you leave, but they need to know by the beginning of September if you plan to take it, so I had to tell you now."

"That's in three weeks," I wheeze.

She nods. "Think about it while you're out. Weigh the pros and cons with one of your lists, then enjoy the wedding. When you get back, you can tell me what you want to do."

That's great. But who the hell is going to tell *me*?

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Chapter Two

My getting-home routine in Seattle was a dance I never thought I'd have to replicate once I returned to San Francisco. But with Jamie gone, I do it every night: flip the hallway light on right away, then the kitchen light, the living room lamps. Turn the TV on before removing my music-blasting earbuds.

I'm eternally grateful to Grace for introducing me to Jamie when I moved back from New York five years ago, and forever thankful to Jamie for giving me a room to rent without hesitation, then becoming my best friend, something I needed more than ever. I miss the way she'd careen from her bedroom after her full day working as a freelance graphic designer, all golden retriever energy as she greeted me at the front door.

This place feels so empty without her. I wish she was here tonight, but she's across the bay instead, out at a dinner Blake's law firm group is hosting. As for my other options, Adam is probably still spiraling and I don't want to go to my more superficial friendships to help me process Nia's bomb.

Sometimes I swear adulthood is staring at your phone and wondering which of your friends has enough time to deal with your latest emotional meltdown, then realizing none of them do.

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Luckily, I'm used to dealing with the messes in my life alone. I collapse onto the gray couch Jamie left behind (along with the enduring mold of her ass on the middle cushion), and pull up my Notes app so I can start a list of pros and cons.

After ten minutes, I have this:

1. I'm moving to Seattle again (pro/con?)

2. For good (con)

3. If I don't, then I'm unemployed (CON)

4. If I do, my friends will probably forget I exist (don't even have to say it)

Oh god. I *can't* move to Seattle.

Even as I think it, though, I remember my time there: those first weeks that I feared would turn into overwhelming loneliness, but instead blossomed into happy hours and weekend explorations with coworkers who turned into friends; the relentless green of it, the way it felt calmer than San Francisco, hushing a vibration in my blood. In New York, there was static noise I could never turn off. I loved Seattle so much I invited Adam and Jamie up to visit, though that never came to fruition.

I suspect I loved it so enthusiastically because I knew I'd come back home. But now San Francisco doesn't feel like home, so how do I know where I actually belong?

Anxiety starts closing its hands around my throat, humming through my body like—

Wait, no, that's my phone underneath my ass. When I grab it, there's a FaceTime request from Adam.

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Right, the DJ disaster, aka a problem I can actually fix.

Purpose replaces panic. I can't wrap my head around a life-changing move with everything else going on, which means I can push Seattle away and deal with it when the wedding is over. For now, Adam needs me.

I sit up, flipping on the nearest lamp before wiping under my eyes, then accept the call.

"Hi!" I chirp.

Adam's dark brown hair is a disaster, a harbinger of an imminent meltdown. There are shadows smudged under his hazel eyes, but relief passes over his tan, freckle-dusted face when our eyes meet.

"Hey, are you busy?"

"Not at all." My voice echoes in the empty apartment. "How are we doing?"

He rubs at his jaw. "We're terrible, but slightly less terrible than earlier."

Grace pops onto the screen, resting her chin on Adam's shoulder. She blows a lock of shampoo-commercial-worthy black hair off her exhausted face.

"Hi, Gracie," I say gently. "I'm going to work on a DJ list tonight, someone who'll play the raddest shit."

"Thank you so much." Her brown eyes fill with uncharacteristic tears as Adam pulls her closer. "Okay, no, I'm *not* crying over a DJ, I swear."

"You're more than allowed to cry over a DJ. I've cried over worse, believe me."

This gets me a wet laugh. Adam shoots me a grateful look, then says, "If anyone should be crying over a DJ, it's me. You know I spent *months* finding Stevie."

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"I know," I say indulgently. This is a man with meticulously created Spotify playlists. Good music at his wedding is non-negotiable. "What's the latest?"

He sighs. "Grace's brother's friend knows a DJ who might be available. We have a Zoom call with him tomorrow afternoon, but keep that list ready to go."

"I'm on it. See?" I tap the phone screen like I would his chest if we were in the same room. "You're already on the other side of this fiasco."

He runs a palm across his jaw, appraising me. "The other thing is, we need two favors."

"Anything."

"My grandma and grandpa are flying in from Dallas tomorrow and I was supposed to pick them up. Is there any chance—"

I hold up a hand. "I've got them. I love your grandparents, so you're basically doing *me* a favor."

"All right." He gives me a wary look. "Before I ask you for the other one, I want to talk about Eli."



It takes me several beats to digest the sharp turn in conversation. Finally, I get out "oh?" with an evenness I've perfected over the last five years.

Logically, I understand. We have to talk about Eli because he's been Adam's best friend since our sophomore year of high school and he's the best man at his wedding, an imminently approaching event. I've been watching the appointment on my calendar that reads *E here* for weeks with a sense of steely doom.

I only have to look at it for another day. He's flying in from JFK tomorrow.

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But whenever Eli is involved, my logic flies out the window,

middle finger extended. He's the last person I want to talk about. He's Adam's best friend, yes, but he's been *everything* to me: a stranger when he walked into our lives thirteen years ago. A friend. My best friend. My boyfriend, college and then live-in when he asked me to move to New York with him. Then, fifteen months later, a stranger again.

I have an Eli Mora list that's pages long, but Adam doesn't know that, because Adam thinks Eli and I found a way to be friends after the most cataclysmic breakup of our lives.

That's what we've made him believe.

Eli and I have never explicitly talked about it, but protecting Adam from the aftershocks of our breakup was mandatory. We came to a silent understanding about how things would work between us in order to keep our collective friendship at status quo, and the first time we saw each other after we broke up, a year later, we fell into it like we'd written the list of rules together.

In my weaker moments, I think about what a fucked-up testament it is to the way we knew each other before: bone-deep, down to the marrow. And I think about how utterly heartbreaking it is that we're using the same connection that allowed us to conduct a wordless conversation across the room to know each other in such a clinical way now. Like strangers who've seen each other naked in every way that counts, in all the ways that wreck you.

But after five years and plenty of practice, my weak moments are few and far between, aided by Eli's distant participation.

It helps that Adam's always been careful not to wade into the fray. There was only one time, when he was helping me move into Jamie's apartment, where he asked me, grave-faced, if I was going to be okay, and then if *we* were. For a second, I couldn't breathe. When Eli and I got together, it was easy to promise Adam that nothing would come between the three of us; anything less than

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forever was just a monster in the closet. Something that would never get us.

I was sick seeing him so worried over a promise we'd broken, and further terrified to think of what would happen if I got as messy on the outside as I felt on the inside. Adam had never given me any indication he had plans to cut me loose, but I knew, thanks to my mom's disappearing act and the transient friendships of my youth, that these things could happen anytime and for less legitimate reasons.

I assured him we were okay and after that, anytime he nudged the subject I repeated my line: *it's fine*.

And it is. But I don't want to talk about Eli. It's bad enough I have to *see* him.

I clear my throat. "Okay. Are you planning to leave me in suspense?"

"Listen," Adam begins. It's not his Jamie's Apartment voice, but it's not neutral either, and my brain sighs out, *shit*.

Grace stands. "I have a sudden hankering for the hand flex in *Pride & Prejudice*, so I'm going to leave you two to it. I'll see you tomorrow, Georgia."

I blow her a kiss, then fix my attention on Adam. He watches his fiancée leave, his eyes turning heart-shaped. "She's so going to fall asleep."

I love that he's in love, but sometimes watching Adam be soft is like observing an alien life-form. "Yes, adorable, please focus."

"Right. Okay." He lets out a breath. "It's just that . . . sometimes I wonder if you and Eli are really okay."

In the ensuing silence, my anxiety crests. "You have to give me more than that."

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"Remember Nick and Miriam's wedding last year?"

At the mention of the Lake Tahoe wedding of our high school

friends, my heart lurches. I might be messy on the inside, but I'm pathologically good at keeping it locked up tight.

Except, unfortunately, when I'm not.

I was shocked Eli even came to the wedding. In the last five years, he's missed more events than he's made. I was even more shocked that he was bringing someone, and it was fine, it was okay, because I was bringing someone, too, a guy I'd been dating for a marathon period of three months. He'd just moved to LA but was coming back for the long weekend.

Only, it turned out he had a severe lack of object permanence. He hooked up with his ex two weeks after moving, apparently having forgotten about me back in San Francisco. I went to Tahoe alone.

It was a blow to my iron-clad plan to endure the weekend. I knew Eli and I would keep our distance, but we'd never been around each other with people we were dating. Even before we got together, I rarely integrated anyone into my friendship with Adam and Eli. No one was worth disrupting our dynamic, and it always did—Adam would turn blandly nice, and Eli would turn quiet. I sensed Eli felt the same way; I heard rare romantic rumblings about him, but he never brought anyone around. The entirety of our relationship, from friendship to everything to nothing, was a consistent stretch of not allowing anyone else into our bubble.

Nick and Miriam's wedding popped it, and I had no one to buffer the experience.

No human buffer could have prepared me for existing in the same space as Eli and another woman, anyway, and the raw flash of shock on Eli's face when he saw I was alone felt like an additional detonation in my chest. I looked away before it could turn into pity, then spent the night bending my own rules. I faked fine

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in front of everyone, but I got sloppy otherwise, splitting my time between drinking myself into oblivion and crying in the bathroom.

Eli got food poisoning and left before the night was over. We barely said a word to each other in front of other people. Another rule broken, flagrantly this time.

I didn't see him the next morning. Adam said he'd gotten on the road early for his flight back, and weeks later, mentioned Eli and his date weren't seeing each other anymore. Apparently his job had gotten in the way. It took everything in me not to laugh, or scream. His job got in the way of every relationship he'd ever had. Ours most of all.

"That night felt weird," Adam says, breaking into my thoughts. "Every other time we've been together you and Eli have been fine, but that night you were . . . not. Lately I've been wondering if you've been *too* fine and that night was closer to the truth."

"Adam, Eli got sick from the salmon and I was drunk. That was the mess."

"Grace saw you crying."

My heart falls out of my chest. "I— because I'd just gotten cheated on."

"I'm not convinced you even liked that asshole. Plus, his name was Julian. You know my theory on J names."

I rub at the pain blooming in my temple. "Yes, that all J names are inherently untrustworthy. Regardless, I did actually like him."

Mostly.

We stay locked in a silent standoff before Adam breaks it. "I stopped asking you and Eli about the specifics of your breakup because whenever I brought it up, you both brushed it off and said it was fine, and I respected that. I still do." Concern and sus-

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picion crease the corners of his eyes. "But are you two really cool with each other? Or has this all been fake?"

I avert my eyes to the FaceTime square I'm contained in so I can monitor my expression. It *is* fake and it's necessary. What happened with Eli is the messiest thing I've ever experienced. I've never wanted to expose Adam to it. Giving him *any* glimpse into how I really feel a week before his wedding, when he's already a disaster, would be tragicomic timing.

"It's not fake," I manage calmly. "Why are you even bringing this up? Nick and Miriam's wedding was thirteen months ago."

"Yeah, and my wedding is next weekend, and you and Eli are about to spend nine days together, not your normal one or two."

I've never been more deeply aware of something in my life.

"I'm holding on to the crumbling corners of this wedding with two hands," Adam continues, "and I'm fucked up with anxiety, except it's mixed with intense joy and all these other weird emotions and Grace—"

He stops with a flinch, then gives me a pleading look. "I need my best people to be okay, mostly because I love you both, but also because *I'm* not okay. So this is like a speak-now-or-forever-hold-your-peace moment. If you need an out, tell me and I'll do whatever you need. Help you figure out how to do the best-people stuff separately, let someone else take over, whatever."

All I hear is, *you won't be around if you're too much.* It's an old fear, refreshed on an endless spin cycle.

I exhale to calm my racing mind and heart, then lean forward, wishing there wasn't a phone screen between us. Wishing there wasn't any distance at all, physical or otherwise. "Things have been going wrong and now you're looking for the next disaster. I get it. But that isn't me and Eli, Adam."

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I should get a goddamn Oscar for this performance—my voice is steady, eyes wide and earnest, the color of a cloudless blue sky. I can already see him shifting this from *potential problem* to *not an issue*.

And that's exactly why the rules on my Eli Mora list exist. I can't let it crumble now, especially with Adam sniffing around the truth: I'm not over what happened between Eli and me. Not even close.

"You're *sure*," he says, inspecting me so closely I shrink back from it.

I hold up my hands, palms forward. "We're better than we've ever been."

That's laying it on thick, but I have faith the dynamic Eli and I created will see us through, just like it has every other time, Nick and Miriam's wedding aside.

It'll go like this: we'll greet each other when he gets here, a casual *hey* and *hello*. Our eye contact will be long enough to look normal, but not so lengthy that it clicks like a lock, the way it used to. We'll engage in friendly banter, will only touch if it sells the story. We'll reminisce if the memory includes other people, but otherwise never bring up the past. We'll be the Georgia and Eli Adam knew before we wrecked each other. We'll do that every day until we have to stand side by side while Adam marries Grace, mirroring the vows I thought I'd say to Eli someday. We'll be breezy, chill. Whatever Adam needs.

And when it's over, I'll let out the breath I've been holding. I'll wave from afar as Eli hops on a plane to New York and disappears back into his job.

Not long before I potentially hop on a plane to mine.

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"All right," Adam says, oblivious to my two-pronged spiral. "If you and Eli both say it's fine, then it's fine."

I narrow my eyes. "What do you mean if *Eli* says it's fine?"

"I talked to him, too." He lifts an eyebrow at my gaping expression. "C'mon, I wasn't going to ask one of you but not the other."

That our responses mirrored one another's bodes well, but I can't help groaning, "You are a disaster."

"One less thing to worry about." He grins, and relief coils around my spine. "Now, back to the other favor."

"Anything."

"E's flight gets in tomorrow afternoon, right around when my grandparents land—"

No, no, no, my brain chants. I stare at my face on the screen, forcing my expression to stay in a Botox-wishes-it-was-this-frozen look.

"Can you pick him up, too?"

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Chapter Three

"Absolutely *not*."

"I'm sorry, I didn't quite—"

"No!" I yell.

"—get that."

"Siri, stop," I shout at my phone on the passenger seat, which is eavesdropping on my shit-talking. I turn back to the task at hand: trying to exert dominance over the ticket machine at the entrance to San Francisco International's short-term parking lot. Even though I've repeatedly pushed the button, it refuses to cough up a ticket, and now there's a restless line of cars snaked behind me.

"You are *not* going to do this to me," I growl at the machine.

"Please take your ticket," is its snotty reply.

"I'm trying!"

Suddenly, an attendant materializes out of the ether. "You need help?"

"You have no idea," I mutter, but I temper it with a sunny, grateful smile. "I can't seem to get a ticket."

"Let's see here . . ." She pushes the button and a ticket slides out, middle fingers raised at me.

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It takes every iota of self-control not to scream as I take it from her. "Thank you so much."

"You enjoy your day," she says, and moseys off.

We're way past that, I fear. I'm twenty minutes late, stress-sweating through my seasonally inappropriate sweater, and deeply wishing I could snatch back the "sure!" I threw at Adam's request; in mere minutes, I'm seeing Eli for the first time since Nick and Miriam's wedding.

"It's not like I could've said no, though," I huff, lurching up the ramp.

Arguing out loud with myself is a bad sign, but I'm right. After yesterday's performance, what excuse would I have? The next week is devoted to catering to Adam and Grace's every whim. More importantly, Eli and I are great, as far as our mutual best friend is concerned.

But now my plan to survive the next nine days without anyone knowing I've labeled it *surviving* has officially gone off the rails. I expected the first time I saw Eli to be at Adam's house for dinner tonight, with witnesses. We'd say hello like the old friends we aren't. Maybe I'd tease him about something—his hair and clothes being predictably perfect despite a transcontinental flight, or the junk food he inevitably has stuffed in his backpack. He's an annoyingly healthy eater except when he's flying; he used to assure me, with a mouth full of Snickers, that the lawlessness of air travel meant empty calories didn't count.

After tonight, I'd spend the week too "busy" to be around Eli before floating up to Napa County next Friday for the festivities.

Instead, we have to play Awkward Uber. Eli's flight gets in at the same time as Adam's grandparents', but he has a ground-eating stride he adopted in New York to maximize his six a.m. efficiency from apartment door to office. He'll get to baggage claim way before Adam's grandparents, which will leave us alone together.

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